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Music

Some Big Sounds On Small Labels

by Judith Bell

The music industry has always been a business, but never before has the emphasis been so much on profit margins and stock dividends. The moguls are no longer men who started with a love of music and a box of records in the trunk of a car. Now it's accountants and attorneys who have the power to break new sounds, and they balk at gambling on unknown musicians playing obscure or out of vogue music. As a result, many forms of disenfranchised music (traditional blues, soul music, bluegrass) are falling by the wayside, and new rockabilly records are classified as oldies. Getting the coldest shoulder is New Wave music, and because of its dire publicity, punk rock is anathema.

In England, where punk rock originated, fans who wanted to take the music home formed their own labels — Stiff Records, for example. As the sounds blew across the sea, New York followed suit with such labels as Red Star and Vengeance. Los Angeles sprouted several independents of its own through the perseverance of diehards who refused to give up despite rejection by the industry and by punk turncoats going pop and disco. Most of these small labels are financed by money earned from outside jobs. Recording is done in homemade or low budget 8 and 16 track studios, and the jobs of producing, design, even stuffing of the record sleeves, are usually performed in living rooms. One group baked labels onto its records in a kitchen oven.

The high costs of paper and printing necessitate uniquely creative packaging. Sometimes artwork and information are printed on the record labels themselves and displayed in clear plastic sleeves. Pressing records on colored vinyl was briefly in vogue. Dangerhouse Records, the foremost innovator in packaging, silkscreened directly onto the clear vinyl of the *Yes LA* album, and has plans to release double or triple singles in separate sections of accordion folded plastic sleeves. The artwork, like the music, defies all the rules, and amazing new visual styles are born with every release. From the School of Ripped and Torn to taboo imagery done in slick, commercial perfection, the photos and graphics are original enough to now be music magazines and fashion tabloids. Some favorite examples are the record covers of the Randoms (*Let's Get Rid of New York*), The Germs (*Lexicon Devil*), The Deadbeats (*Brainless*), and from New York, The Cramps (*Human Fly*) with a glow-in-the-dark logo. For a visual jolt, it's worth digging through the singles racks at the nearest record store.

Getting Them Out

Distribution is the biggest problem. There are distributors who will accept small quantities of these records in various regions around the country, but then leave them collecting dust in the warehouse, rarely pushing a record store to take a risk on an unfamiliar product or pitching a dubious DJ to spin one on the turntable. Foreign distribution isn't very lucrative either, because under shaky

European economies, kids cannot afford expensive imports; and because of complicated international monetary laws, the small labels usually get stiffed. Rollin Rock's rockabilly label and Bomp Records do some distribution by mail order, but some small labels do the legwork themselves.

Since 45s are usually relegated to "concentration camps" in the backs of record stores, and prices from vinyl to postage are on the rise, the only way for small labels to survive is to produce LPs. Costs are minimally different, and the 12" records are better received at every level. Virtually every big city is releasing a sampler album of different local bands, and Bomp Records here in L.A. is producing a "Wave" series with 12 different bands on each record. Dangerhouse Records has released its *Yes L.A.* collection, and Upsetter Records' *Tooth and Nail* featuring six L.A. bands will be out in June. Many bands are simply holding out until they can garner enough material to press a big record of their own.

Radio stations are under pressure from the industry to push MOR and disco discs, so airplay for New Wave records is scarce. According to Dangerhouse's David Brown, there are small pockets in such cities as Cincinnati and Buffalo where their records get played, but in the megacities the best places to tune in the hard core sounds are on college stations or rare New Wave programs such as L.A.'s "Rodney on the Rocks" (on KROQ Sundays at 8 p.m.). Magazines such as *Slash* and *Bomp*, and xeroxed, hand-distributed fanzines trumpet the latest hot singles, but the best place to hear the records is between sets at clubs like the 88 and Yet Another Masque.

Most people involved with the labels seem optimistic that the audience for New Wave and other cult music like rockabilly will grow as people tire of the monotonous 120 beats per disco minute and daily doses of MOR mush. Even executives in the "business before pleasure" music industry are keeping tabs on the bands, not only just to steal them away, but because of the rampant enthusiasm of the press and the people in the streets. Here's a rundown of some of the local labels that are trying to keep these musical underdogs alive:

Iggy Pop, Too

Bomp Records—Smooth-talking Greg Shaw, founder of this company, was a rock writer who bailed out of the established industry and formed his own label in 1974, which is a part of the Bomp network that includes a record shop, a magazine and a sales firm. Though his label has an image of being pop and punk oriented, Shaw is interested in anything new whether it's "rockabilly, punk, porno or disco," and actively seeks new artists, musicians and writers to make Bomp an "energy center where people can come and make things happen."

In sheer numbers alone, Bomp is at the top of the pile. Its diverse roster has included Iggy Pop, James Williamson (Stooges), the Weirdos, the Sonics, Crime, Rainbow, the Last, the Corvettes, the B-Girls and Emmitt Siniard; and there are plans for Stiv Bators (Dead Boys) and some punk/rockabilly bands from Finland. Shaw comments optimistically on the future: "The established record industry is like Hollywood in the '30s. It has nothing to do with what's going on in the street, it's just a fantasy world. There's a huge void of all kinds of things that are not mainstream, and with the mainstream becoming narrower and narrower, everything that's left out is going to survive through independent companies."

Dangerhouse Records—A group of transplanted artists and musicians involved in L.A.'s New Wave scene formed this label and recorded the first and best punk bands in town: Alley Cats, Avengers, Bags, Black Randy & the Metro Squad, Deadbeats, Dils, Eyes, Germs, Randoms, Weirdos, Howard Werth and X. Dangerhouse's graphics and packaging designs started fads that have been copied everywhere. Co-founder Pat Garrett defines the label's image as "Nothing is sacred, the thorn in the saddle . . . but not exclusively punk. Dangerhouse could have happened at a different time in a different music scene."

His partner, David Brown, compares the state of the small labels to "race records of the '30s," but thinks they have a good future because of growing demands for the records. Along with national distribution, he'd like to see someone take $100,000 and try to make a top 40 hit of X's "We're Desperate." Future projects include a Black Randy album titled *Pass the Angel Dust, I Think I'm Bowie.*

Rolling Rock Records—Ron Weiser, a devotee of '50s rock and rockabilly, formed this label after he emigrated from Italy in the 1960s to find that America had become oblivious to Fats Domino, Little Richard and Eddie Cochran. His first recordings with rockabilly artist Ray Campi were sold by mail order and got a good response overseas, but it wasn't until six months ago that the rockabilly renaissance in the U.S. sparked renewed interest in his label, which includes rockers like Jackie Lee Cochran, Chuck Keegan, Johnny Carroll and Johnny Legend.

Future plans include an album by Gene Vincent's daughter, Melody Jean, and some cuts recorded by Gene before he died in 1971. Rolling Rock cultivates a "raw, nasty, irreverent" image because Ron thinks the established record industry has gone completely off the track. "Rock and roll should be fun. Now they're using all these computers and technicians in white suits pushing buttons; they don't even need musicians anymore. There should be a place in this big country for labels like mine and others, and there should be a place for rockabilly on the air waves."

Just Wait!

Slash Records—An affiliate of New Wave mouthpiece *Slash* magazine, its

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